



♦ CIA's Latin Assets Cross the Cocaine Line

By Jerry Meldon

One after another, former CIA allies in Latin America seem headed for the dock on cocaine-trafficking charges. One of those CIA assets in drug trouble is Venezuelan Gen. Ramon Guillen Davillaver who was indicted by a federal grand jury in Miami earlier this year. Guillen, who remains at large presumably in Venezuela, was charged with smuggling 22 tons of cocaine into the United States from 1987 to 1991.

Guillen allegedly ran this massive smuggling operation in coordination with the Cali cocaine cartel while he simultaneously was running the Venezuelan National Guard unit which coordinated with the CIA on drug interdiction. He was the CIA's most trusted narcotics asset in Venezuela.

Even worse, in December 1989, the CIA collaborated with Guillen on one dubious plan to ship a ton of cocaine to the United States, purportedly for intelligence purposes. It was part of a supposed plan to catch major drug traffickers. When the Drug Enforcement Administration's country attaché for Venezuela objected to the scheme, the CIA went over the attaché's head and appealed to Washington. DEA headquarters also rejected the plan, but that was an answer the CIA would not accept.

A federal statute forbids government importation of illicit drugs for "controlled" crime-fighting purposes without DEA approval. But CIA officers authorized the cocaine shipment to go ahead. The agency's decision apparently fit the spy agency's certainty that in areas of national security, it knows best. In an internal government report on the

case, DEA special agent James Kibble wrote that "vital information was not forwarded to the DEA or was held back for unknown reasons."

In the Guillen case, however, the CIA's heavy-handed actions exploded three years later as a P.R. embarrassment. CBS-TV's "60 Minutes" broadcast a report on the illegal shipment of the one ton. The story prompted the CIA to make a rare admission of error. CIA headquarters admitted to "poor judgment and management on the part of several CIA officers." One agent resigned. The Caracas station chief was recalled and retired soon afterwards. But no CIA officials were charged in the Guillen indictment.

The Miami Herald has reported that internal DEA documents claim that Guillen cracked during interrogation in November 1991 and confessed to the illegal shipments. A year later, however, Guillen denied that he had made any such confession. He insisted that his involvement in drug shipments to the United States was done with proper U.S. government authorization.



But, according to the federal charges, Guillen allegedly shipped as many as 22 tons of cocaine illegally into the United States, while supposedly standing shoulder to shoulder with the CIA in the drug war. Those 22 tons over four years average out to nearly six tons a year, a volume that would put Guillen in the same big leagues with Mexican drug kingpin Juan Garcia Abrego, who was convicted last October for smuggling seven tons of cocaine per year into the United States.

If the federal indictment is correct, Guillen would have been a major cocaine smuggler at the same time he was palming himself off to the CIA as a leading anti-drug warrior. Whichever way one looks at the case, it does not reflect well on the boys at Langley, Va. Either the CIA was complicit in the illegal drug shipments or its intelligence-gathering capabilities left a lot to be desired.

The Guillen indictment also comes at a time when several federal investigations are under way into the CIA's possible role in cocaine smuggling by the Nicaraguan contra rebels during the 1980s. Extensive documentary evidence, including the findings of a congressional investigation, has existed since the 1980s implicating the contras in cocaine shipments to the United States.

But that history -- and the U.S. government's failure to take action -- came under renewed scrutiny last year with a series published in the *San Jose Mercury News* citing more documents and testimony linking those shipments to the outbreak of the nation's "crack" epidemic. An angry African-American community demanded a full investigation and public release of all relevant documents.

The *Mercury News* series also prompted angry denials from the CIA which protested its innocence. Major national newspapers -- *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* -- sided with the CIA. In lengthy articles, all three papers attacked the *Mercury News* series as poor journalism, but acknowledged the longstanding -- and largely overlooked -- evidence of cocaine smuggling by the CIA-backed contras.

The newspapers could have noted, too, a much longer history of CIA assets peddling narcotics. That history goes back to the post-World War II days when the Cold War was just beginning and U.S. intelligence agencies enlisted organized crime elements in Italy, France and Japan to combat communist-dominated trade unions.

The CIA used the mob organizations to rout the communists especially from the strategically crucial transportation industry. But organized crime exploited its Cold War protection to rebuild international trade routes for the smuggling of heroin and other illicit goods.

The same pattern held true when the CIA needed indigenous forces for proxy wars from Indochina in the 1950s and 1960s to Afghanistan in the 1980s. Many of those local troops supported themselves with opium production. To gain the allegiances of these forces and to help finance the conflicts off budget, the CIA either tolerated the drug smuggling as a price for doing business or directly assisted in the transportation of the illicit cargoes. Concerns about the suppression of the drug trade took second place to the Cold War. [See Alfred W. McCoy's *Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* for more details]

The rules of this intelligence game were the same in America's back yard, only more so. One of the CIA's worst

setbacks occurred in Cuba in the late 1950s when Fidel Castro's revolutionary forces ousted a U.S.-supported dictator and closed the Mafia-owned casinos in Havana. Then, Castro declared his commitment to communism, putting a Soviet ally only 90 miles from American territory.

The CIA's Western Hemisphere division got the job of ridding Cuba of Castro and the assignment put the spy agency into new collaborations with Mafia dons. One crime kingpin recruited in the anti-Castro cause to handle assassination plots was Santo Trafficante Jr. who had used his Havana operations as a base for narcotics trafficking. The CIA also trained an army of Cubans which failed to defeat Castro at the Bay of Pigs but remained in South Florida as a potent political force.

While maintaining ties to the CIA and other U.S. agencies, some Cuban warriors adapted their clandestine skills to the cocaine business. In effect, they became foot soldiers in Trafficante's drug armies. One of the most notorious of these Cubans was Ricardo "Monkey" Morales Navarrette, who had been trained by the CIA as a paratrooper and demolitions expert and fought in a U.S. government covert operation in the Congo, as well as in Cuba. In the late 1970s, he also took his skills to Venezuela where he served as a high-ranking officer in that nation's corrupt intelligence agency, known by the acronym DISIP.

But Morales became a legend in Miami as the prototype for the CIA-connected operative who worked part-time for the U.S. government as an informant, part-time for the Mafia as a drug trafficker and part-time as an anti-Castro terrorist engaged in violent attacks against civilian and diplomatic Cuban targets. Morales parlayed his CIA connections and his on-again-off-again services as a U.S. government informant to buy himself a measure of protection for his criminal undertakings.

In the 1970s, some CIA handlers of the Miami Cubans developed a flexible attitude toward what could be tolerated in exchange for help from these "informants." But Morales's dangerous game finally caught up with him when he was murdered in Little Havana in 1982. [For more details, see *Cocaine Politics: Drugs, Armies and the CIA in Central America* by Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan Marshall]

The 1980s brought new excitement to the CIA's Latin America division. With the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua against longtime U.S.-supported dictator Anastasio Somoza, Castro had his first allied government in power on the mainland of North America. A new and staunchly anti-communist president, Ronald Reagan, wanted the Sandinistas crushed at almost any cost.

The blunt instrument which the CIA chose was a rag-tag army of former Somoza soldiers who were holed up in Honduras. Already, they were receiving training from Argentine intelligence, which had been running a brutal "dirty war" in Argentina. The Argentine military also had helped organize the so-called "cocaine coup" in Bolivia which had installed drug traffickers to power in that South

American nation. [See *The Big White Lie*, by former DEA agent Michael Levine]

The contra war proved a magnet, too, for the anti-Castro Cubans. They flew into Central America on a mission that combined business and passion: one part anti-communism, one part lucrative cocaine trafficking. The Colombian drug cartels were also quick to pick up on the value of using the contra "freedom fighters" as a cover for transiting cocaine to the United States. After all, President Reagan had hailed the contras as "the moral equal of our Founding Fathers." The U.S. government would be hard-pressed to expose the contras as drug traffickers.

In Panama, CIA Director William J. Casey recruited Gen. Manuel Noriega to the contra banner. He may have been the best known drug-tainted leader who cooperated with the CIA's operations in Nicaragua. [He is now in federal prison serving a lengthy sentence for cocaine trafficking.] But the little general was not alone. Under the protection of the CIA, local commanders assisted contra units in drug shipments in Costa Rica and El Salvador.

Yet possibly, the most important Central American drug way station was Honduras. In impoverished Honduras, members of the high command and its intelligence arm already saw cocaine trafficking as a very tempting route to riches. The powerful Honduran-based trafficker, Juan Ramon Matta Ballesteros, had financed a military coup in 1978.

Then, through most of the 1980s, Matta lived in open luxury at a ranch outside Tegucigalpa.

In the mid-1980s, the U.S. government hired SETCO, a Matta-connected airline, to fly supplies to the contras. The hiring occurred despite a DEA report that SETCO was formed by "American businessmen dealing with Matta [and] smuggling narcotics into the United States." But the DEA was hampered in its investigation of Matta's operations because the Reagan administration had closed the DEA's office in Honduras in 1983.

So, with no regular in-country DEA agents, only the FBI's capture of 763 pounds of cocaine at a remote airstrip in Florida tipped off law-enforcement authorities to a planned military assassination of the Honduran civilian president. Gen. Jose Bueso-Rosa, a senior officer who had worked with the CIA's contra operation, was arrested and charged with masterminding the coup which was to be financed with cocaine profits.

To the north in Mexico, meanwhile, the DEA was fighting an ever more violent war with the cocaine cartels. In Mexico, in February 1985, star DEA agent Enrique Camarena Salazar was tortured and then murdered by the application of a Phillips-head screwdriver to his skull. Matta

and several of his Mexican associates were implicated in the murder.

The Camarena murder finally stirred senior DEA officials to action. In the late 1980s, with the contra war winding down, the DEA reportedly compiled a list of Honduran officials implicated in the drug trade. The list had the names of officers who had held jobs as defense minister, director of military intelligence, armed forces chief of staff, director of the military school and the Navy chief of staff.

Faced with this new pressure, Honduran authorities surrendered Matta. In a raid on Matta's ranch in April 1988, U.S. and Honduran law-enforcement agents seized the drug kingpin and spirited him off to the United States. He was convicted in Los Angeles on both murder and drug-trafficking charges.

But the fallout from questionable national security relationships continues. On March 7, 1997, a federal grand jury indicted Joseph Michel Francois, the former military police chief of Haiti, on charges of collaborating with Colombian drug cartels to smuggle 33 tons of cocaine and heroin into the United States over a nine-year period.

Francois led the 1991 coup which ousted elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. In exile, Aristide and his left-

ist allies accused the military government of engaging in drug trafficking. At the time, Francois was running the U.S.-trained counter-narcotics unit that managed to arrest

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fewer and fewer drug traffickers.

Still, senior U.S. national security officials disputed Aristide's allegations. In 1993, the CIA also cooperated with congressional conservatives who opposed restoring Aristide to power. The CIA sent Congress a classified report (of dubious reliability) that portrayed Aristide as a psychopath. The maneuvering undercut President Clinton's strategy of pressuring the Haitian army to accept Aristide's return and bought another year in power for the generals.

Finally, in 1994, Clinton launched an invasion of Haiti that drove Francois and his military allies into exile. Francois sought refuge in Honduras, where he has been fighting extradition to the United States.

So, the Guillen case in Venezuela does not stand alone. Indeed, it might be called part of a pattern, a pattern of the CIA's shady alliances with Latin and other international drug lords. The spy agency put the war against leftists and communism ahead of the war against cocaine and organized crime. It's been doing so for half a century. ~